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Partial Suffrage in Iowa: 1894

Katherine Boyd
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PARTIAL SUFFRAGE IN IOWA: 1894

by

Katherine Boyd

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the History

Landon Storrs
Thesis Mentor

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
History have been completed.

Alyssa Park
History Honors Advisor

The University of Iowa

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by

Katherine Boyd

Iowa City, IA

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of women's history, much attention has been granted the American women's suffrage movement. For over eighty years, women campaigned hard at both the national and state level for full and equal voting rights. On June 4th, 1919, more than seventy years after Stanton's famed Declaration of Sentiments, Congress passed the 19th amendment, which declared:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.¹

Following approval in the House and Senate, the amendment was then put before the states, as the law required thirty-six states to ratify the amendment before women could be granted full and equal suffrage rights. For over a year, suffragists and anti-suffragists across the nation hotly debated ratification, but on August 26, 1920, Tennessee became the last required state to ratify the amendment.²

No longer barred from the ballot based on their sex alone, women aged twenty-one and up could now exercise a discernible voice in the political arena by means of the ballot. A pivotal moment in American history, the 19th amendment can be seen as the pinnacle victory of the suffrage movement. However, that is also not to say that all women were completely disenfranchised prior to 1920. Contrary to popular perception, some women could and did vote prior to state ratification. In fact, many Western states had been quick to embrace female enfranchisement, with support for suffrage expanding from west to east. Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Washington, California, Oregon, Arizona, Nevada, Montana, Kansas, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Michigan, and New York,

¹ Majorie Wheeler Spruill, eds. *One Woman, One Vote Rediscovering The Woman Suffrage Movement*, (Troutdale, OR: NewSage Press, 1995): 19.

² Ibid.

had all awarded women full voting rights years before 1920 (see Fig. 1).

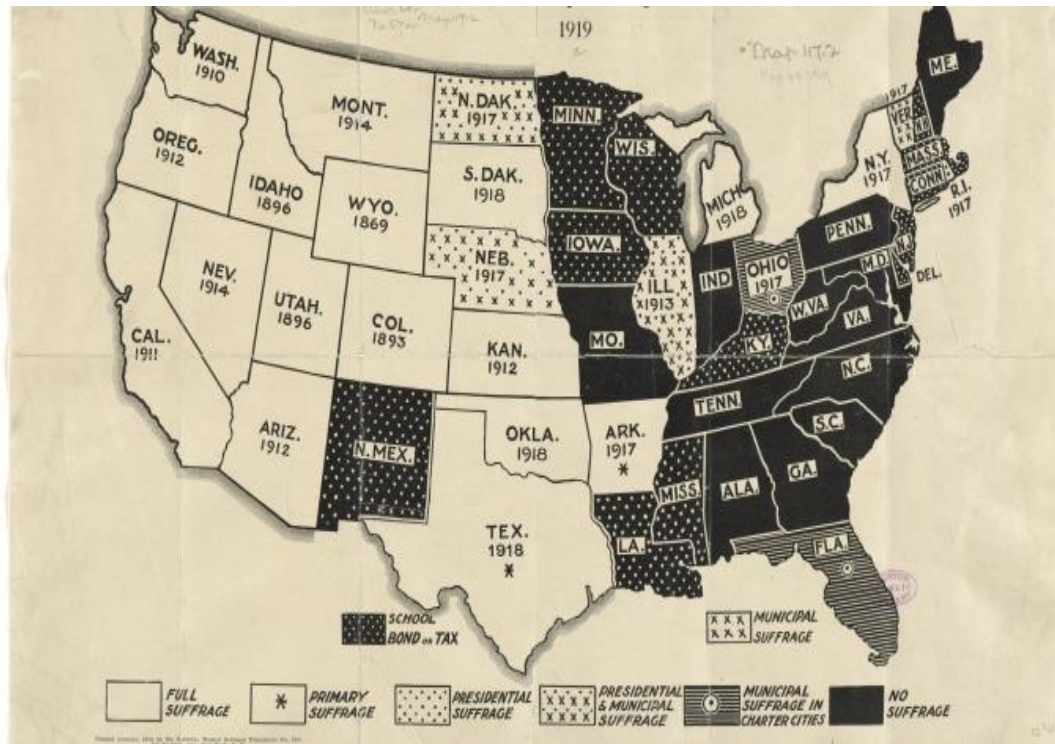


Figure 1: Map of United States showing states which granted partial or full suffrage rights to women prior to federal ratification. The map indicates that Iowa women held school, bond, and tax suffrage, but Iowa women also held municipal suffrage rights as well.³

For Iowa women, first experiences at the ballot box came not in 1920, but in 1894 with the passage of municipal and school suffrage rights. Although more limited in its scope than full suffrage, this partial suffrage allowed women to vote on school issues, local officers, or bond-related matters. In the Iowa suffrage narrative, partial suffrage has been often been included only as a mere footnote, yet it is a topic that merits deeper consideration.

Authors like Louise Noun have provided a deft introduction to the stories of Iowa's more famous suffragists, but in order to truly understand the suffrage movement

³ National Woman Suffrage Publishing Co., "Victory Map: 1919" (map). Norman B. Leventhal Map Center Collection, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/9g54xm04t>.

in Iowa, one must go beyond biographies, and instead look to formulate a more complete picture of how Iowa suffragists and their organizations worked to reach everyday women across the Midwest.⁴ A closer examination of partial suffrage in Iowa offers important insight into the ways in which state suffrage organizations like the Iowa Woman's Suffrage Association helped to further women's voting rights in the late 1890s. In a state largely opposed to full enfranchisement, partial suffrage was a successful strategy for circumventing political roadblocks, working within accepted Victorian constructs about gender and race rather than against. Partial suffrage helped change the perception around female voting in the state, combating certain anti-suffragist claims and celebrating Iowa woman voters.

However, not all Iowa women benefitted from school and municipal suffrage equally. Expanded female rights could also be exploited to perpetuate racial inequality. At both at the state and national level, many suffrage movements tended to emphasize the enfranchisement of white women only, while doing little to empower women of color. In 1869, Iowa women had won the ability to serve in elected roles as school officials or board members. Early on, this element of partial suffrage was often utilized to benefit a white hierarchy. As Professor Leslie Schwalm points out in *Emancipation's Diaspora*, many school superintendents during the 1870s supported segregation and sought to limit the admission of black students to white schools. By opening up school roles to women, and electing white women who opposed desegregation, schools could exploit woman

⁴ Louise R. Noun, *Strong-Minded Women: The Emergence of the Woman-Suffrage Movement in Iowa* (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1969): 187.

suffrage rights to ensure the continued separation of white and black students.⁵ Even following ratification in 1920, certain states attempted to limit voter eligibility by enacting literacy tests, poll taxes, and residency requirements that were particularly discriminatory towards people of color. It must be acknowledged that for African American women, equal enfranchisement would not be fully secured until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁶

Despite the discrimination black voters faced however, African American suffragists could also sometimes use partial suffrage to their advantage. As Wanda A. Hendricks stipulates, partial suffrage rights allowed black women to gain influence and participate in the political process while fighting for full and equal suffrage rights. In Illinois, the passage of partial suffrage rights in 1915 helped enable the work of famed African American suffragist Ida Wells-Barnett.⁷ Through her suffrage organization, the Alpha Club, Wells-Barnett helped many black voters to register, and women of color aptly exercised their newfound municipal suffrage rights to elect Oscar DePriest, Chicago's first black alderman, into office.⁸

In order to better comprehend the complexity of partial suffrage in Iowa, one must be familiar with early suffrage history in the state. Throughout the 1860s, suffrage groups in Iowa were often limited to local townships, yet several women began to look to expand suffrage societies beyond their communities and called for an organized Iowa campaign.

⁵ Leslie Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009): 209.

⁶ Noun, *Strong Minded Women*, 136.

⁷ Wanda A. Hendricks, "Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago" in *One Woman, One Vote*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler (Troutdale, OR: New Sage Press, 1995): 263.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

In 1870, pioneering Iowa suffragists like Annie Savery, Nettie Sanford, Mary Darwin, and Mattie Griffith successfully hosted the first Iowa woman's suffrage convention in Mt. Pleasant. The collaboration between these attendees resulted in the formation of a new, statewide organization dedicated to securing the vote for all Iowa women.⁹

However, as Professor Schwalm points out, there is no evidence that any women of color attended this meeting, and their absence is likely linked to the presence of black suffrage opponents, including state legislator John Irish, who helped oversee the convention.¹⁰

Beginning in 1870s, the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association became the primary suffrage organization in the state, acting as an auxiliary organization to the National Woman Suffrage Association. Right from its conception, the IWSA asserted womankind's right to full and equal voting rights. Like many other state suffrage organizations, the IWSA aimed to win female enfranchisement by amending the Iowa state constitution.¹¹

From the beginning, the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association was clear that membership was not to be limited on the basis of race or sex.¹² However, the association was also one that was deeply plagued in its early years by moral and social dogmas.¹³ When the free-love movement, which held that marriage was a way to make women financially dependent and restrict their mobility within society, gained popularity within the national campaign for suffrage, IWSA Vice President Annie Savery was swift to align

⁹ Noun, *Strong Minded Women*, 139.

¹⁰ Schwalm, 210.

¹¹ "Constitution of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association", in *The Woman's Standard* 10, no. 4 (April 1897): 4, microfilm.

¹² Noun, 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 188.

the organization with more traditionalist views on marriage.¹⁴ Despite Savery's efforts, many Iowa newspapers at the time opposed female suffrage and sought to discredit Savery by casting her as a supporter of free-love, leading local suffrage organizations to disassociate themselves with the IWSA.¹⁵ The Polk County Woman's Suffrage Society, under the urging of Des Moines suffragists like Martha C. Callanan, expressed a dedication to moral purity and denounced Annie Savery.

Following the press scandal over Annie Savery, Martha C. Callanan attempted to reform the image of the IWSA. During her four successive terms as IWSA president, Callanan aimed to root out so-called "radicals" within the suffrage movement, and established the IWSA as a proponent of temperance and conventional marriage.¹⁶ In 1886, Callanan and editor Mary J. Coggeshall began publishing *The Women's Standard*. As the first issue of the periodical states:

The Woman's STANDARD comes before the people as the official organ of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association. It will appear monthly for one year-longer if given sufficient encouragement. Its aim will be in the direction of the on-coming tide of the world's thought which, under a republican government demands the equality of all classes of citizens.¹⁷

Throughout its twenty-five year publication, *The Woman's Standard* advocated tirelessly for female enfranchisement. However, it often did so through a maternalistic lens, citing 19th century gender norms and ideas about feminine morality to argue for women's suffrage at the state level.

This conservative repackaging of the IWSA reflected a push to separate the suffrage movement from its more radical predecessors. In the 19th century, separate

¹⁴ Noun, *Strong Minded Women*, 188.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁷ Martha C. Callanan, *The Woman's Standard* 1, no. 1 (September 1886): 2, microfilm.

spheres ideology and the “Cult of True Womanhood” heavily shaped white, middle class society. Popular belief held that a so-called “true woman” would serve as an example of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.¹⁸ Although treated as men’s inferiors, women were viewed as being more naturally religious, and as such, were held to higher moral standards by society. Early suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony argued that these ideas about gender differences had become a social and political tool to ensure women’s subservience to men, and advocated for society to recognize equality between the sexes in all aspects of life.

However, these arguments also alienated women who celebrated these perceived gender differences and reveled in their status as homemakers. A large group of white, moderate women were unimpressed with Stanton’s call for equal enfranchisement of the sexes, instead believing that women could use their roles as moral figureheads to influence their male contemporaries to vote in the best interests of society. While these anti-suffrage women viewed indirect influence as a sufficient way to enact their political will on society, they perceived the ballot as a threat to the power they currently held as domestic, ethical figures. Rather than enact societal improvement via the vote, these women advocated for the formation of philanthropic, social reform groups, in which they could use their standing to influence moralizing legislation. Many of these groups campaigned for temperance, social hygiene, and child welfare, and lobbied against prostitution and gambling, etc. These anti-suffrage women viewed enfranchisement as a

¹⁸ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-174, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179>.

corrupting factor, stating that voting women would ultimately be forced to place their party's will above their community considerations at the ballot box.¹⁹

Yet over time, certain prominent national organizations dedicated to social reform slowly began to align themselves with suffrage. Beginning in the 1880s, the Women's Christian Temperance Union started to champion enfranchisement as a necessary component of the temperance cause. Citing what they saw to be the continued ills of society, reformers like Frances Willard argued that exerting indirect political influence through compelling a husband or son to vote a certain way was no longer sufficient to sustain the "moral goodness" of America.²⁰ Willard and the WCTU worked to sell the idea of female enfranchisement to a moderate Christian base and reimagine the ideal "true woman" as a wife or mother figure who would fight to protect the interests of the home and family through legislation.²¹ As a supporter of the WCTU, Callanan worked to replicate these ideals in *The Woman's Standard*. Rather than discount separate spheres ideology, *The Woman's Standard* embraced it head on. For many Iowa suffragists, female enfranchisement came to be seen as the only way to ensure the interests of the home and family in a democratic society. In that same first publication, Martha C. Callanan went on frame suffrage as a Christian campaign, stating, "...to suppress the full utterance of the moral convictions of a class which so largely molds the character of the

¹⁹ Manuela Thurner, "Better Citizens Without the Ballot: American Anti-Suffrage Women and Their Rational During the Progressive Era," in *One Woman, One Vote*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler (Troutdale, OR: New Sage Press, 1995): 203.

²⁰ Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, "Frances Willard and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's Conversion to Woman's Suffrage", in *One Woman, One Vote*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler (Troutdale, OR: New Sage Press, 1995): 117-120.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

race, is a crime against humanity against progress against God.”²² Thus for Callanan and other Iowa suffragists, female suffrage was not only necessary for the good of society, but for the morality of the human race.

Many Christian African American women’s groups also advocated the vote as a way for women to transform society’s social ills.²³ And this idea of a higher, universal feminine morality was also emphasized in early efforts to unite black and white Iowa suffragists. During a meeting between the Polk County Woman Suffrage Association and black suffragists in 1885, some Iowans sought to bridge the racial divide within the movement. One white suffragist asserted that white women would be undeserving of the vote unless they were committed to fighting for equal enfranchisement for all Iowa women.²⁴

However, although the IWSA claimed to support all women’s right to the franchise equally, the reality was more limited. The public debate over women’s suffrage overlooked racial divides within the Iowa suffrage movement and in general, reports on suffrage largely focused on white communities. As Thomas G. Ryan explores, white, Protestant communities in Iowa were shown as being very supportive of suffrage, while Catholic and German communities in Iowa were viewed as staunch opponents to suffrage.²⁵ For woman of color, publications like *The Woman’s Standard* provided little assistance in the fight towards equal suffrage. While the IWSA in theory aimed to

²² Martha C. Callanan, *The Woman’s Standard* 1, no. 1 (September 1886): 2, microfilm.

²³ Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993): 121.

²⁴ Schwalm, *Emancipation Diaspora*, 210.

²⁵ Thomas G. Ryan, “Supporters and Opponents of Prohibition,” *The Annals of Iowa* 46 (1983): 515.

enfranchise all women in Iowa, *The Woman's Standard* could sometimes be both implicitly and explicitly racist. Although *The Standard* did sometimes report on the accomplishments of notable women of color, many articles featured in the periodical focus solely on the work of white suffragists.²⁶ In utilizing a rhetoric that celebrated the perceived moral superiority of white, middle class women, *The Woman's Standard* also played upon notions of black inferiority. As Professor Leslie Schwalm points out, the periodical would later go on to publish various editorials by white women complaining of the “ignorance” of black male voters, as well another editorial asserting that black women should take up roles as domestic servants.²⁷ Although reports from *The Woman's Standard* can offer invaluable insight into the passage of partial suffrage in Iowa in 1894, it is also important to acknowledge the organization's weaknesses.

While the passage of partial suffrage in 1894 can be viewed as an important stepping-stone in Iowa suffrage history, enabling women certain voting rights a full twenty-five years before the passage of the 19th amendment, it was not without its limits. However, at a time when equal suffrage bills had stagnated at the state level, and the federal movement was focused on internal reorganization, municipal and school suffrage arose as a way for the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association to work within the current political and social framework. In addition, partial suffrage also addressed the challenge of how to reach female citizens who remained indifferent or opposed to the suffrage cause. These experiences at the ballot helped combat arguments against suffrage, as well

²⁶ N. O. Pycaynne & Celia P Wooley, “Colored Women,” *The Woman's Standard* 1, no. 9 (May 1887): 7, microfilm.

²⁷ Schwalm, *Emancipation Diaspora*, 211.

as celebrate the idea of female voters, helping to build a suffrage base that would to pave the way for full and equal enfranchisement later on.

II. POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars have traditionally viewed the 1890s as a time of little progress in the American suffrage movement, even going so far as to label the period “the Doldrums”. Indeed, during this time only six state referenda were held over the question of women’s suffrage, and all six of these referenda eventually failed. Additionally, despite the best efforts of national suffrage campaigns, no discernable gains for women’s suffrage could be seen at the federal level.²⁸

In 1895, the Massachusetts State Legislature attempted to measure suffrage support in the state by holding a simulated referendum, in which both men and women could vote on the issue of female enfranchisement. While the results of this referendum were to be legally nonbinding, both pro-suffrage and anti-suffrage groups opposed this experiment. Prior to the November referendum, anti-suffragists worked to dissuade women from voting on the referendum, citing low numbers of voter attendance to create the perception that the general female population of Massachusetts was opposed to, and uninterested in the rights of the franchise.²⁹ Of the 612,000 potential women eligible to vote in Massachusetts, less than 7% registered to vote. In addition, among the 42,676 women registered, only a little over half of these women actually cast a ballot in the

²⁸ Sarah Hunter Graham, “The Suffrage Renaissance: A New Image for a New Century, 1896-1910,” in *One Woman, One Vote*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler (Troutdale, OR: New Sage Press, 1995):157.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

referendum. Although only 861 women of these 23,065 female voters opposed women's suffrage, the lack of women voting, coupled with much greater participation from male voters, enabled anti-suffragists across the nation to not only claim that the public did not support female enfranchisement, but that women themselves did not want the right to vote.³⁰

In recent years, scholars have worked to revise the perception that the only suffrage developments of this time period were as negative as the Massachusetts example. Although suffrage legislation had stagnated, historians like Sara Hunter Graham argue, these years actually existed as an important period of reorganization within the movement. Following continued losses, many suffragists began to realize that a large portion of female citizens remained indifferent to the suffragist cause. This "suffrage renaissance", as Graham calls it, focused on distancing the movement from its more radical legacy and repackaging the female vote to appeal to mainstream society.³¹ As examined previously, this conservative repackaging of suffrage was already well underway in Iowa. In acknowledging the national perception of equal suffrage during this time, it becomes easier to see why partial suffrage was able to circumvent some of the same political and social roadblocks.

For Iowa women in particular, the process to obtain full and equal suffrage rights was arduous. Suffrage at the state level required an amendment to the Iowa Constitution to remove the word "male" to award women full and equal voting rights.³² However, in order for such an amendment to be pushed through, it needed to receive approval in both

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Sarah Hunter Graham, "The Suffrage Renaissance: A New Image for a New Century, 1896-1910", 159.

³² Noun, *Strong Minded Women*, 130.

the Iowa House of Representatives and the Iowa Senate in two separate Legislative sessions.³³

ART. II, §1, CONSTITUTION OF THE STATE OF IOWA (ORIGINAL)

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ARTICLE II.

RIGHT OF SUFFRAGE.

Electors. SECTION 1. *[Every (white)* male citizen of the United States, of the age of twenty one years, who shall have been a resident of this State six months next preceding the election, and of the County in which he claims his vote sixty days, shall be entitled to vote at all elections which are now or hereafter may be authorised by law.]***

*The above section was amended in 1868 by striking the word "white" from the first line thereof: See Amendment [1]

For qualifications of electors, see also United States Constitution, Amendments 19 and 26

A proposal to strike the word "male" was defeated in 1916

**In 1970, this section was repealed and a substitute adopted in lieu thereof: See Amendment [30]

Figure 2: article detailing voter eligibility in Iowa.³⁴

Furthermore, if the amendment was indeed passed in both Legislatures, it would then need to be put to a general vote in order for said amendment to become law in the state of Iowa. Additionally limiting was the fact that the Iowa Legislature convened only every two years.³⁵ In 1870, a women's suffrage bill had passed in both the House and Senate during the Thirteenth General Assembly, but was ultimately unable to garner enough support when the Legislature conferred again in 1872.³⁶ This political framework hindered suffrage attempts by the IWSA.

The question of women's suffrage was often a politically polarizing issue. In

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Iowa Const. art. II, § 1.

³⁵ Ruth A. Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa: A Historical Account of the Rights of Women in Iowa from 1838 to 1918* (Iowa City, IA: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1918): 202.

³⁶ Ibid.

1893, several bills about equal suffrage had been introduced during the 24th General Assembly of the State of Iowa in 1893, yet all had lacked enough support to pass.³⁷ As Ruth Augusta Gallaher reported:

Four bills on the same subject were introduced in the House: one to confer municipal suffrage upon women; another granting them school suffrage; a third, giving them general suffrage; and a fourth, to give women the right to vote for presidential electors. The municipal suffrage bill was lost by a vote of twenty-seven to fifty-four; the one for school suffrage failed by a vote of twenty-nine to fifty-three; while the others were indefinitely postponed.³⁸

Although the writers of *The Woman's Standard* ultimately envisioned a future of equal suffrage for Iowa women, they also realized the need to confront the current political reality. Every year, the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association met to review the progress they had made towards the larger goal of full suffrage, and to identify ways in which they could expand support for female enfranchisement. When the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association gathered in 1893, they began to realize that full and equal voting rights for women were a long ways off for Iowa women, and looked to expand the rights of women through other means.³⁹

While the conclusion of the 24th General Assembly had been overall disheartening, these results also illustrated that partial suffrage had at least seized some traction in the Iowa Legislature. Holding Senate approval ratings of over 50%, the results of the municipal and school bills were encouraging enough to merit the attention of the IWSA, and Iowa suffragists began to view partial suffrage, which awarded women the right to vote in school, local, or bond-related issues, as an attainable goal. As one Iowa

³⁷ Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa*, 202.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

³⁹ "Annual meeting I. W. S. A." in *The Woman's Standard* 8 no. 4 (1893): 2, 3, 6, microfilm.

City suffragist asserted, “women of Iowa intend to make an effort in the next legislature to secure municipal suffrage.”⁴⁰

During a time when full and equal voting rights were often seen as incendiary to the strict gender dichotomy that the majority of 19th century society worked to preserve, municipal and school suffrage came to be seen as a happy medium. For those opposed to the equal status of women in society, partial suffrage seemingly appeared as a way to keep women confined to the domestic sphere and temporarily quell calls for full female enfranchisement. As the *Sioux City Journal* reported, “In most states, the entering wedge of equal suffrage is in purely school elections, and has been based upon the familiar argument that women, more even than men, are directly interested in school affairs.”⁴¹ Partial suffrage allowed women to take part in the political process on a small, controlled, and polite scale, and allowed them to exert influence on things within the feminine sphere, like city/school issues.

In addition, school and municipal suffrage had precedents elsewhere in the Midwest. When efforts to establish suffrage via constitutional amendment continuously failed year after year, Kansas women looked to municipal suffrage to break the political stagnation. The passage of the Municipal Woman Suffrage Bill in 1887 had enabled Kansas women to vote in the elections of city or school officers, as well as bond issues. This same legislation also afforded women the right to serve in municipal and school offices. “For more than a dozen years have the friends in Kansas tried to get woman suffrage resubmitted, and finally at the last session of the Legislature the question of

⁴⁰ *The Daily Citizen* 1, no. 304 (April 9, 1893): 4

⁴¹ “Well Done Kansas”, in *The Woman's Standard* 1, no. 7 (July 1887): 4, microfilm

municipal suffrage, coming before a body of picked men, received a handsome majority.”⁴²

Unlike full and equal suffrage, which required a special ballot measure in order to amend the state constitution, partial suffrage could be passed via direct legislative action, making it remarkably easier to institute during a time when the common population remained opposed to equal voting rights for women. In fact, as *The Woman's Standard* asserted, in the thirteen states that had awarded school suffrage to women via direct legislative action, “...in not one of these [states] is it at all probable that it would have been conceded if submitted to the rank and file.”⁴³

Furthermore, municipal and school suffrage had slowly gained support with some prominent Iowa politicians over the years. Governor William Larrabee publically endorsed women's suffrage in his 1886 inaugural address, yet realizing the legislative hurdles a suffrage amendment required, Larrabee advocated for the adoption of school and municipal suffrage instead. As Ruth A. Gallaher points out, Governor Larrabee especially emphasized the need for municipal suffrage, suggesting that partial suffrage should be implemented in Iowa in order to test the capability of female voters. While Larrabee posited that women would rise to the challenge and vote in the best interest of the public, he also reasoned that partial suffrage rights could always be revoked “...if women should not avail themselves of the privilege when conferred, or if the results were unsatisfactory.”⁴⁴

⁴² “Well Done Kansas”, in *The Woman's Standard* 1, no. 7 (July 1887): 4, microfilm.

⁴³ “Municipal Woman Suffrage”, in *The Woman's Standard* 1, no. 10 (October 1887): 4, microfilm.

⁴⁴ Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa*, 197.

Additionally, in his later statements on suffrage, Larrabee called attention to the positive results of partial suffrage in elsewhere in the Midwest. At the 1890 General Assembly, Larrabee once again encouraged his fellow legislators to consider adopting municipal and school suffrage in the state as a trial run for the larger suffrage question. Taking note of the success of partial suffrage in Kansas, he asserted, “The continued good results of its exercise in our sister state Kansas re-enforce the arguments in favor of trying the experiment in Iowa.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, he asserted that Iowa was behind the times when it came to their handling of women’s suffrage:

In many of the states women vote for members of school-boards, and I see no reason why they should not do so here. It is worthy of note that the territory of "Wyoming, after years of experience with woman suffrage at all elections, has recently with great unanimity ingrafted the principle into the constitution with which it is now seeking to enter the Union.”⁴⁶

Taking all these factors into account, partial suffrage indeed seemed like the ideal cause for the IWSA to champion in 1894. However, while it would be easy to perceive partial suffrage as a convenient compromise between the two sides of the suffrage question, that is not to say that partial suffrage for Iowa women was not hard won. In February of 1894, two bills were introduced to the Iowa House and Senate, one championing municipal and school suffrage, while the other called on Iowa legislators to amend the state constitution to provide full voting rights for women.⁴⁷ Yet, the ultimate fate of these bills would not be decided until the 25th General Assembly of Iowa convened in April.⁴⁸ In the months leading up to this vote, *The Woman’s Standard* printed numerous editorials urging women to write their local congressman and senators,

⁴⁵ Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa*, 198.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

calling upon readers to compel their family members to petition as well. As Ruth Gallaher asserts, “an unusually active campaign was begun and petitions poured into the legislature- [with] as many as fifty being presented in a single day.”⁴⁹

While anti-suffragists had long clung to the claim that women did not want to vote, the growing, contrary testimony they received from these female petitioners now served to strip politicians of this claim. Keeping in line with the IWSA’s promise to hold anti-suffragist politicians accountable, *The Woman’s Standard* closely followed the proceedings. In February, two special committees in both the House and Senate were organized to oversee the two suffrage bills.⁵⁰ In response, *The Woman’s Standard* printed the names of each senator and representative appointed, calling upon readers to petition:

⁴⁹ Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa*, 202.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

In the house, a special committee for woman suffrage has been appointed. All the members except one are known to be in favor of the bills. The committee consists of the following persons: Chapman, Carter, Funk, Milliman, Byers, Miller (of Cherokee), Griswold, Jester, Steen, Mitchell, Nicoll, Sessions, Cooper (of Pottawattamie), Roggs, and Watters.

The committee on constitutional amendment in the house of representatives is as follows: Cornwall, Ellison, Allen, Root, Myerly, Taylor, Coonley, Wood, Bell, Nicoll, Baker, and Schultz.

The amendment committee in the senate consists of the following persons: Senators Palmer, Kilburn, Rowen, Lewis, Henderson, Harmon, Dent, Downey, and Baldwin.

All petitions should be sent to your senator and representative as they are here to represent the wish of their constituents and it is well to let them know that you are thinking in that direction.

The Woman's Standard closely examined the Senate committee's handling of the suffrage question, taking great care to celebrate Iowa senators sympathetic to the suffragist cause. Yet they also identified various anti-suffragists in the Iowa Senate,

⁵¹ "Legislative Notes", in *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 6 (February 1894): 1, microfilm

unafraid to name and shame committee members who opposed suffrage, including Senator Palmer of Washington, Iowa. When Palmer later argued that his Washington constituents were not pushing him to support female suffrage of any kind, *The Woman's Standard* was able to quickly discredit Palmer, printing numerous petitions from women in his county in order to contradict his claims.⁵²



Figure 3: Senator David J. Palmer (R) of Washington, Iowa ⁵³

Senator Palmer stated that a woman's place was in the home, and that enfranchisement would effectively usurp females from their domestic thrones. While *The Woman's Standard* often used examples of suffrage in other states as a way to galvanize support for enfranchisement, Palmer, in contrast attempted to argue that suffrage was actually detrimental to state learning. Palmer asserted that Iowa, a state without any female voting rights, ranked higher in intelligence than states that had passed laws enabling partial or full suffrage, and yet he simultaneously attributed Iowa's high

⁵² "Suffrage in the Iowa Senate", in *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 7 (March 1894): 1-8, microfilm.

⁵³ "Senator David J. Palmer" The Iowa Legislature, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislators/legislator?personID=3746&ga=26>.

education levels to the efforts of mothers and female teachers. *The Woman's Standard* was quick to identify the hypocrisy in this statement, leveling that if women were indeed the reason for Iowa's higher levels of literacy and education, did it not stand to reason that women possessed the intelligence needed for the ballot?

On March 22, the municipal and school suffrage bill was put before the House of Representatives. This bill, nicknamed the "Watkins Bill", was largely championed by Representative Watkins of Jefferson County, who argued that women could and would vote intelligently. Furthermore, Representative Watkins argued that the female vote would benefit the interests of the home, as well as the larger Iowa community. The partial suffrage bill was passed in the House at a vote of 51 yeas to 44 nays and then considered by the Senate.⁵⁴

While full suffrage was ultimately defeated in the Senate by a vote of 20:26, the efforts of the IWSA proved partially successful when the municipal and school suffrage bill was approved.⁵⁵ Indeed, after twenty years of suffrage lobbying, the Legislature could no longer completely ignore the calls of the IWSA. As *The Woman's Standard* reported, "the Legislature has felt compelled to grant something to woman, and so enacted a law that gave her a share in raising and applying municipal taxes, thus conceding her to be a safe custodian of public monies."⁵⁶ On April 13th, 1894, the 25th General Legislature of Iowa passed the following act:

Section 1. That in any election hereafter held in any city, incorporated town or school district for the purpose of issuing any bonds for municipal or school purposes, or for the purpose of borrowing money, or for the purpose of increasing

⁵⁴ "At the Legislature," in *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 8 (April 1894): 1, microfilm.

⁵⁵ Rowena Stevens, "Women May Vote in Certain Elections", in *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 12 (August 1894): 1, microfilm.

⁵⁶ "Progress", in *The Woman's Standard* 10, no. 11 (November 1898): 2, microfilm.

the tax levy, the right of any citizen to vote shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex, and women may vote at such elections the same as men, under the same restrictions and qualifications.⁵⁷

In accordance with this law, Iowa women who were aged twenty-one and up, and registered to vote in the state of Iowa, could now vote on bond/tax issues in municipal elections, independent school district elections, the annual district township meeting, and in special elections.⁵⁸ As *The Woman's Standard* stipulated, "Bonds and taxes may be voted at the annual municipal election of officers, also at the annual election in independent school districts when school officers are elected, but the district townships hold different elections for the election of school officers and the voting of bonds, etc. The voting bonds, levying tax and borrowing money may at and all times be made a special election."⁵⁹

For Iowa suffragists, this victory was bittersweet. On the one hand, school and municipal suffrage was a seemingly tiny progress in the overall battle to win full and equal enfranchisement. *The Woman's Standard* readily acknowledged that the ability to cast a ballot on public issues was but a "small crumb" compared to their male contemporaries' freedom to vote in presidential elections.⁶⁰ On the other hand however, the passage of partial suffrage represented a rare victory against a previously deaf legislature, who had "...year after year, received the advocates of women suffrage with courteous smiles and honeyed words of encouragement."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Women Vote Act, H.R. 45, 25th General Assembly of Iowa (1894): 47.

⁵⁸ "At the Legislature", in *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 8 (April 1894): 1, microfilm.

⁵⁹ Stevens, "Women May Vote in Certain Elections", 1.

⁶⁰ "Our New Privilege", in *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 9 (May 1894): 4, microfilm.

⁶¹ "Annual meeting I. W. S. A." *The Woman's Standard*, 3.

Yet there was also hope in the feeling that partial suffrage would lead to greater rights later on. As *The Iowa State Bystander* noted, “This makes three large and adjacent states in this part of the Union-Iowa, Kansas, and Colorado in which women can vote in municipal elections, while in Colorado they can also vote at other elections.”⁶² The periodical then remarked on the positive ways in which these two other states had embraced partial suffrage, going on to assert, “The full right seems likely (to be) extended them in Kansas when the men vote on the constitutional amendment next November.”⁶³

Furthermore, the IWSA urged women to use their newfound municipal and school voting rights to elect other females into office. *The Woman’s Standard* advocated this as a way to expand the power and influence of Iowa women, as well as test the bounds of partial and municipal suffrage. While this likely seemed a risky endeavor to some, *The Woman’s Standard* was quick to quell any fears, reminding women all the rights that they currently held, had come from the action of the Iowa Supreme Court rather than legislature.⁶⁴ As Rowena Stevens in the August 1894 edition of *The Woman’s Standard* posited:

The most feasible plan presenting itself for keeping posted on all parts of the state is to place women on school boards and in such office as they are eligible to, also keep a vigilant watch on cities and incorporated towns. When the opportunity comes let the women be ready to send a test case to the Supreme Court, where our rights have always been justly sustained.⁶⁵

⁶² *The Iowa State Bystander* (June 15, 1894): 1, Library of Congress.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Stevens, “Women May Vote in Certain Elections”, *The Woman’s Standard*, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Here, Stevens alludes to the 1869 Iowa Supreme Court case that enabled women in Iowa to practice law.⁶⁶ Thus, Iowa women simply had be brave enough to test the bounds of partial suffrage and *The Woman's Standard* was confident that the Iowa Supreme Court would interpret the law in their favor. Indeed, this proved true for two Rockford women. When two women were elected school directors in 1896, male members of the board challenged their qualifications. In response, the two women took their case to the State Attorney General, who ultimately decided that the legislation called for the recognition of elected female school officers.⁶⁷ When the law came before the Iowa legislature again, they voted to sustain it; partial suffrage was here to stay.⁶⁸

III. COMBATING ANTI-SUFFFRAGIST FEARS

In addition to working within the current political framework, partial suffrage also served as a way to circumvent popular arguments against enfranchisement, and win over women who had been previously opposed or indifferent to the suffrage cause. Armed with the newfound ability to vote on school and municipal issues, the female population of Iowa deliberated over how to wield these powers. For the women who had opposed suffrage on the grounds that it distracted them from domestic sphere, partial suffrage posed a curious problem. Perhaps the most potent argument against suffrage was the idea that voting rights for women would dismantle separate spheres. As historian Paula Baker asserts, there was a dominant fear among anti-suffragists that, “If women voted, they

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 10 (June 1894): 4, microfilm

⁶⁸ *The Woman's Standard* 10, no. 7 (September 1897): 3, microfilm

would abandon the home and womanly virtues.”⁶⁹ However, in the Cult of True Womanhood, motherhood reigned supreme, and did the schools their children attended not indeed fall under this domestic realm?

Partial suffrage enabled women to extend the interest of the home on a controlled, public level. As *The Woman's Standard* asserted, “Women should vote because their influence will be beneficial upon the conduct of public affairs.”⁷⁰ While the broader political arena could be a dangerous, uncouth place for women, many women did not hold municipal or school elections in the same regard. In fact, for many mothers, daughters, and wives, school and municipal suffrage came be seen as an extension of the domestic sphere/responsibility. When Waterloo, Iowa considered instituting a new library tax in 1894, women from all over the county appeared to cast their ballot. As the *Standard* reported, “Many women voted who claimed to be opposed to suffrage for women, and many who have appeared indifferent to woman suffrage, eagerly availed themselves of this opportunity to express their opinion in a decisive manner.”⁷¹

While Senator Palmer had claimed in his arguments against suffrage that women simply did not want to vote, the involvement of women in these local elections served to further contradict his claims. In the first municipal election following the passage of partial suffrage, the *Sabetha Herald* reported that only twenty-eight more men voted than women.⁷² As the *Herald* asserted, no longer could anti-suffragists claim that women did

⁶⁹ Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920”, in *The American Historical Review* 89, No. 3 (June 1984): 638.

⁷⁰ K.P., “Fundamental Principles”, in *The Woman's Standard* 8, no. 12 (August 1894): 6-7, microfilm.

⁷¹ S. W. W. “Waterloo’s Library Vote”, in *The Woman's Standard* 9, no. 3 (May 1894): 1, microfilm.

⁷² “They do vote”, in *The Woman's Standard* 1, no. 9 (September 1887): 8, microfilm.

not vote, “From this time forth let us hear no more that women care nothing for the right of suffrage and would not exercise it if they had the opportunity.”⁷³

Continued reports on female voter turnout directly challenged the popular perception that American women remained indifferent to the suffrage cause. African American periodicals in the state also asserted that women were especially keen and capable voters, and remarked favorably on partial suffrage.⁷⁴ *The Iowa State Bystander* acknowledged how seriously females participated in their new voting roles in states with partial suffrage, reporting, “the ballot is a dearly bought privilege, not lightly to be bartered away, the ballot does not purify women but she realizes its value more fully than man, who has never been required to sit with folded hands and see its debasement.”⁷⁵ For black suffragists, whom society had marginalized the basis of race and sex, the vote was a way to both protect and expand their rights.⁷⁶

However, anti-suffragists lobbied that the ballot to women was also opening the ballot to corruption.⁷⁷ The same ideology that celebrated the higher moral compass of women also stipulated their inferiority. Many argued that a woman’s vote would only mirror the interests of her husband or the dominant male in her life.⁷⁸ Voting opened up women to corruptibility, as a man could use his superior status to influence his wife or

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Rosalyn Ternborg-Penn, “African American Women and the Woman Suffrage Movement” in *One Woman, One Vote*, ed. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler (Troutdale, OR: New Sage Press, 1995):136.

⁷⁵ *The Iowa State Bystander* (December 13, 1895): 3, Library of Congress.

⁷⁶ Ternborg-Penn, 138.

⁷⁷ Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920”, *The American Historical Review*, 638.

⁷⁸ Frank Foxcroft, “Some Objections to Municipal Suffrage for Taxpaying Women” Boston: Massachusetts Association Opposed to Further Extension of Suffrage to Women, n.d. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*.

sister's vote. If a woman's husband was less than upstanding himself, could this woman be trusted to vote "right", to vote in the best interests of general society?

Published accounts of Iowa women voting in municipal and school elections served to counter these worries. In July of 1896, the city of Waterloo voted on yet another school issue. Both men and women considered whether or not to issue bonds of \$9,000 in order to enlarge the local high school.⁷⁹ As *The Woman's Standard* reported, "Only two women voted against the measure, while many of the women who voted for the measure knew their husbands would vote against it. The mothers fully realized the needs of their children, while their fathers, a majority of them vote for the saloons, the mothers feel that they can afford all the school buildings that the children need for their use."⁸⁰ At the time of voting, most men had been opposed to expanding the high school, and as *The Woman's Standard* asserted, the measure surely would have lost had it not been for female voters. "Women can be depended to vote for the home every time" the periodical concluded.⁸¹ Such examples illustrated the moral conviction of female voters to place the interests of education and child welfare above all, and instilled the sense that women could indeed be entrusted to vote in the best interest of the home and society.

In addition to the critique that women could not be trusted to vote right, a notion also arose among anti-suffragists that the act of voting itself could defeminize women. Paula Baker aptly summarizes this fear, stating, "The differences between the sexes would be obscured: men would lose their manhood and women would begin to act like

⁷⁹ Nellie F. Weeks, "Women Vote Again in Waterloo", in *The Woman's Standard* 9, no. 7 (July 1896): 6, microfilm.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

men.”⁸² Again, published accounts of women voting served to counter anti-suffragist claims, instead touting partial suffrage as the exercise of feminine rights, and emplacing voting as a very pleasant, polite affair. When Keosauqua voted to elect new school officials in 1896, female voters relayed their experiences to *The Woman's Standard*, insisting that it could not be a more courteous event.⁸³ As the periodical summarized, “When our lady friends appeared at the polls and presented their vote, no hesitancy was shown on the part of the gentlemen, who at once recognized their rights, and with a laugh and a joke, accepted the votes that were deposited by the genial two dozen enthusiasts. They were all right, and so were their votes.”⁸⁴

The ability to vote in school and municipal issues also galvanized a new younger generation of would-be suffragists. For a group of young Ames women in 1896, the excitement of voting, even on such a limited capacity, was palpable. Female turnout was exceedingly high in April as the city considered whether to extend its water works program and install an electric light plant. Perhaps a seemingly mundane issue for some, these women reveled in their newfound autonomy, showing up for the election quite early, and in the 2nd ward alone, it was reported that over sixty women came to vote on the issue.⁸⁵

However, these experiences at the ballot also made Iowa women more aware of the limits of partial suffrage. During the Ames vote on the water works program, the men present were also able to vote to elect city officers. *The Woman's Standard* reported that

⁸² Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920”, 638.

⁸³ Keosauqua Election”, in *The Woman's Standard* 9, no. 2 (May 1896): 3, 4, microfilm.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁵ M. E. Gilbert, “Voted at Ames”, in *The Woman's Standard* 9, no. 2 (May 1896): 1, 2, microfilm.

some women mistakenly thought they would be eligible to cast a ballot as well.⁸⁶ When these women were only allowed to vote upon the bond issue, some females sought to challenge the stipulations of partial suffrage, arguing that they were entitled to the full vote.^{87 88}

In a letter titled, “Let Us Unite”, Mary J. Coggeshall addressed the readers of *The Women’s Standard* and congratulated them on the various successes the Iowa women’s suffrage movement had brought about during the past ten years.⁸⁹ In regards to partial suffrage, Coggeshall had this to say:

But how has the cause of human freedom prospered during the passing years. Are one-half the people of this pseudo republic any nearer the goal of political liberty? Are Iowa women any nearer the ballot than ten years ago? We answer, yes, most decidedly. Let us look away from politicians and legislatures, from platforms and parties, to that unspeakable force called public sentiment, before which parties bow and legislatures do reverence. It is delicious to contemplate the wonderful growth of the question of woman suffrage that has recently been made; and happily this growth is most plainly apparent just where it ought to be, among women and girls.⁹⁰

Perhaps the most notable growth in suffrage support had occurred among women’s’ groups themselves: by 1897 there were 85 county societies and 150 local clubs in the state dedicated to female enfranchisement.⁹¹ Additionally, as Professor Schwalm points out, African American women formed at least six suffrage societies during the 1890s, including the Afro-American Protective Association.⁹²

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Stevens, “Women May Vote in Certain Elections”, *The Woman's Standard*, 1.

⁸⁸ Gilbert, “Voted at Ames”, *The Woman’s Standard*, 2.

⁸⁹ Mary J. Coggeshall, “Let Us Unite”, in *The Woman’s Standard* 9, no. 7 (September 1896): 1, microfilm.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Noun, *Strong-Minded Women*, 243.

⁹² Schwalm, *Emancipation Diaspora*, 216.

While partial suffrage did illustrate to many that change within the current political framework was possible, Coggeshall went on to assert that it also showed the capability of women to band together in the greater suffrage struggle. As Coggeshall argued:

Women are rapidly learning to combine their forces. If each had to make the struggle for freedom alone the task would be hopeless. We believe that ten women organized into a club can bring to bear a power for good that fifty women working along could not. Why should not women stand together and blend their voices in one grand chorus for freedom?⁹³

During the following years, the IWSA sought to involve increasing numbers of conservative upper-class women, who could bring financial support and prestige to the Iowa campaign for equal enfranchisement. In these suffrage societies, women sought to involve the larger community in the campaign by sponsoring lectures featuring prominent suffragist supporters, hosting parlor meetings, and organizing county conventions.⁹⁴ In 1893, Lucy Stone and Carry Chapman Catt had introduced this “society plan” to the women of Denver, Colorado, and had experienced great success.⁹⁵

Yet as Sarah Hunter Graham points out, these suffrage society plans were often aimed at involving white women only.⁹⁶ Although Coggeshall seemingly argued for a united suffrage force, it must be acknowledged that the IWSA continued to prioritize the involvement of white women over collaboration with African American suffragists. While the IWSA could have benefitted greatly from collaborating with the Afro-

⁹³ Mary J. Coggeshall, “Let Us Unite”, in *The Woman’s Standard* 9, no. 7 (September 1896): 1, microfilm,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Graham, “The Suffrage Renaissance: A New Image for a New Century, 1896-1910”, 160.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 162.

American Protective Association, racism within the movement largely prevented the white and black suffragist organizations from combining their forces.

IV.CONCLUSION

Today, many Iowans remain unaware that women could and did vote prior to the Nineteenth Amendment. Additionally, past Iowa suffrage historiography has often viewed the 1890s as a stagnant time in the Iowa suffrage movement and has granted limited attention towards 1894 municipal and school suffrage. Yet by neglecting to examine this topic in-depth, historians may overlook the various ways in which municipal and school suffrage helped strengthen the movement towards full enfranchisement. On the other hand however, while the work of the IWSA during this time undoubtedly helped further suffrage support in the state, it must also be critiqued for doing little to bridge the racial divide within the state movement.

During the years when the national suffrage movement worked to rebrand, partial suffrage existed as an important stepping-stone. As suffragist leader Carrie Chapman stated at the 1897 National Suffrage Convention, “Some people feel that progress is slow, and some of our enemies feel that our progress is so slow that they can take courage. But it is not slow, for the evolution of society is ever gradual. Our movement is not so far behind as may be supposed. In fifty years thirty states have granted partial suffrage to women.”⁹⁷

For many Iowa women, partial suffrage became an apt way to circumvent both the political and societal attitudes that hindered the IWSA’s larger attempts to establish

⁹⁷ Noun, *Strong-Minded Women*, 242.

full enfranchisement in the 19th century. During a time when the Iowa Legislature had continuously rebuffed bills aimed at equal suffrage, partial was a feasible win. And by limiting the scope of female voting to school, bond, and tax issues, partial suffrage could be marketed as a safe option to those who opposed the involvement of women in politics. School and municipal suffrage also existed as an important trial run in the movement towards full enfranchisement, and illustrated the capability of women voters in the state. During a time when many women were perceived as being indifferent to the suffrage cause, school and municipal suffrage demonstrated that Iowa women did want the ballot, and would exercise their voting rights with enthusiasm and care. Additionally, partial suffrage successfully navigated Victorian gender norms in a way that dismantled many popular anti-suffragist arguments. In framing school and municipal issues as an extension of the domestic realm, partial suffrage was able to appeal to women who had been apathetic towards the question of suffrage or favored indirect influence. Reports on municipal and school issues helped change the perception of suffrage in the state, illustrating the domesticity, morality, and reliability of female voters. Being able to vote in school and municipal issues gave many Iowa women a desire for expanded voting rights, and brought a new generation of suffragists into the larger fight for full and equal suffrage rights.

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